

# Messenger of the Sun

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Standing in front of a gigantic snow-covered volcano, you are surrounded by the cold and windy *paramo*, high rolling tundra covered with alien looking flora. Wild horses, cattle, and llamas dot the landscape. Then a large black shadow skims across the *paramo* floor. The graceful, proud messenger of the sun, the king of all vultures, makes a rare fleeting appearance. The Andean Condor, *Vultur gryphus*, the largest flying bird in the world, is on the verge of disappearing forever from the face of the earth.

The Andean Condor's struggle for survival is particularly critical in Ecuador, where it is the national symbol. Where once several hundred graced the skies above Ecuador's high Andes, now less than a hundred and possibly as few as 40 remain. The condor is rapidly losing ground to habitat destruction, lack of food, and low reproductive rates. Some are poisoned by local residents. Every hazard that the bird faces is related to humans. Surveys carried out since 1990 suggest that the status of the condor in Ecuador has become very critical. If nothing is done now to protect the threatened species, a captive breeding program like that of the California Condor may be required.

Interior and the U.S. Peace Corps-Ecuador have joined Ecuadorians in a campaign to save the condor. The Department's efforts under the Partnership for Biodiversity project funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development are coordinated through Interior's Office of International Affairs.

The Partnership activities in Ecuador began in early 1996. The campaign is led by the *Fundacion Ornitologica del Ecuador* (CECIA), whose executive director, **Alfredo Luna**, is the team leader for Project Condor. The team includes representatives from the *Instituto Ecuatoriano Forestal de Areas Naturales y Vida* (INEFAN), Ecuador's protected area management authority, Peace Corps, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Department of the Interior.

**Marc Weitzel**, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service condor and protected areas expert, oversees the Department's technical assistance to the project. Weitzel, currently project leader at the Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge Complex in California, has experience in Latin America, the



Above, participants at a workshop at Cayambe reserve gather for a group portrait. At right, Dave Ledig, left, and Darrel Periman, right, teach monitoring techniques at a workshop session. Photos by David Clendenen

Caribbean, and the South Pacific, and is a former Peace Corps Volunteer in Colombia and Papua New Guinea.

The initiative's main objectives are 1) conducting intense monitoring and investigation of the condors in five protected areas, including four high-altitude reserves in the northern region of Ecuador; 2) providing environmental education in the communities surrounding these protected areas; 3) promoting ecotourism through income generating projects with the local people; and 4) strengthening the management of protected areas in the targeted reserves. Peace Corps Volunteers are working with each of these components. Their main efforts focus on environmental education and ecotourism.

Until now, there has been little or no data collected



At right, speaking into microphone, Louis Martinez, the chief of Ecuador's Cayambe/Coca reserve, urges students to protect their national symbol during Condor Day ceremonies last July.

on the threatened Andean condor and no systematic effort to precisely determine the cause of its decline or to monitor the species and its high Andean ecosystems. Reserve staff had not been properly equipped or trained to conduct basic monitoring in high altitude ecosystems. Little had been done in environmental education and outreach among high Andean communities. And there had been no regional collaboration on Andean condors and ecosystems.

A number of activities already have been accomplished. Project Condor has formed a network with other Ecuadorian institutions to assist in the monitoring and environmental educational efforts. Ecuadorian park guards and managers participate actively in the monitoring and environmental educational programs.

The Partnership trained 32 Ecuadorian and Colombian professionals in monitoring techniques and the use of monitoring equipment (Global



Positioning System receivers, computers, cameras, binoculars). **David Clendenen** and **David Ledig**, of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, assisted CECIA and INEFAN in this effort. Clendenen is a senior wildlife biologist with the California Condor Recovery Program and Ledig is the manager of Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge in Nevada.

This small group of Ecuadorian professionals trained and equipped by the Partnership for Biodiversity project is now engaged in systematically collecting data in the reserves on condor roosting and nesting sites, population dynamics, food availability, and habitat disturbance. The group is assisted by a larger network of park guards, Ecuadorian volunteers and teachers, as well as Peace Corps Volunteers, who are collecting and submitting data on condor sightings. All data are analyzed and



A theater presentation featuring a giant condor helps Ecuadorian elementary school students learn about the threatened species during last year's National Condor Day. Peace Corps Volunteer Ines Rutkovskis stands next to the condor.

presented annually to Ecuadorian agencies in a format useful for decision-making. Ledig and **Jim Wiley** of the U.S. Geological Survey's Biological Resource Division, recently provided training in data management and analysis to key individuals involved in handling the data.

The project expanded Ecuador's National Week of the Condor educational activities. Condor Week celebrations included parades, puppet shows, art expositions, round table discussions, and children's drawing contests. More than 2,000 students from 18 schools participated in a march in the mountain city of Cayambe, displaying banners, flags, and large hand-made condors—all with the "Save the Condor" message.

An environmental education workshop trained more than 30 park guards, community leaders, and teachers from towns near the protected areas in the use of ecological games, puppets, and techniques of environmental interpretation. **Roy Simpson**, environmental interpreter at the National Historical Park in Tumacacori, Arizona, helped with this workshop. The Ecuadorians found the workshops exceptionally useful and have incorporated what they learned in their work.

In the targeted communities, environmental education efforts are geared toward reversing negative myths about the condor, and decreasing practices such as condor hunting and poisoning and paramo burning, all of which are harmful to the birds and their ecosystem. Small community-based, tourism-related income generating activities, consistent with the theme of condor conservation, also are being launched to help motivate targeted communities to conserve the condor and its habitat.

The design for a Condor Conservation Center in the national capital is underway. To be located in the metropolitan park of Quito, the Center would provide a base site for people from all areas of Ecuador to learn about the Andean Condor and its habitat. Public education is especially important because of the need to change current negative and unrealistic perceptions about the condor. Demonstrations using trained captive condors will be part of an educational program to teach the public about the beauty and importance of these birds in Ecuadorian ecosystems.